

Rochester Institute of Technology

**RIT Scholar Works**

---

Theses

---

8-1-1996

## Embracing the celestial body

Suzanne Grantham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

---

### Recommended Citation

Grantham, Suzanne, "Embracing the celestial body" (1996). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology.  
Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact [ritscholarworks@rit.edu](mailto:ritscholarworks@rit.edu).

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

**EMBRACING THE CELESTIAL BODY**

by

Suzanne Tindall Grantham

August 1996

Approvals:

Adviser: Leonard Urso

Date: 8.26.96

Associate Adviser: Mark Stanitz

Date: 9-5-96

Associate Advisor: Roberley Bell

Date: 8.26.96

Department Chairperson: Bob Schmitz

Date: 9-5-96

I, \_\_\_\_\_, prefer to be contacted each time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the following address:

Suzanne Tindall Grantham

1925 Lakeside Dr.

Orlando, FL 32803

Date: 8.26.96

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Chapter

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	1
PREFACE.....	2
ARTIST STATEMENT.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
STATEMENT OF INTENT.....	6
THE WORK.....	7
Container/Containment/ Contained.....	11
Muted.....	13
Shield.....	15
Crown of Thorns.....	17
Passages: An Hourglass.....	19
Growth.....	21
CONCLUSION.....	22
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	23

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATION

Fig - 1: <b><u>Container / Containment / Contained</u></b>	page
Copper, Steel, Photography 6'6" x 1'8" x 1'8" .....	10
Fig - 2: <b><u>Muted</u></b>	
Copper, Steel, Photograph, Birch bark 2'8" x 1' x 1' .....	12
Fig - 3: <b><u>Shield</u></b>	
Copper, Bark, Steel 3'9" x 1' x 8" .....	14
Fig - 4: <b><u>Crown of Thorns</u></b>	
Bark, Copper, Steel 2' x 7" x 4" .....	16
Fig - 5: <b><u>Passages: An Hourglass</u></b>	
Copper, Steel, Photographs, Sand 2' x 1'2" x 1'2" .....	18
Fig - 6: <b><u>Growth</u></b>	
Bronze, Steel, Grass 1'4" x 4" x 2" .....	20

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the individuals who have supported me in life, as well as during my thesis work:

I would like to give thanks to my parents and siblings who have supported and encouraged me. They have given me the opportunity to pursue an education as well as to experience different parts of the World. Without their love and support I would have not grown into the caring and passionate woman that I am today.

I would like to thank my advisors: Len Urso, Mark Stanitz, and Roberley Bell for taking the time to be on my committee. Thanks Len, for giving me the opportunity to prove myself and to flourish as an Artist. Your wisdom and understanding of life is highly motivating, as is as your spiritual warmth. Roberley, thanks for your constant insight into my work and the confidence, reassurance, and understanding of who I am and what I was trying to accomplish.

Lastly, thanks to my friends new and old who have been there in my life when I needed someone the most. Davya, you are a life - saver, thanks for being there to bounce ideas off, your straight forwardness, and most of all editing the this thesis. Finally, I am very thankful for the support and unconditional love received from all who have supported me through this. Time and distance might pull us apart but you always hold a place close to my heart. Thanks for all the wonderful memories.....

## PREFACE

Suzanne Tindall Grantham is a native Floridian who came to RIT to study Metals/Jewelry at the School for American Crafts. She received her BFA from Rollins College in the spring of 1993. Following her undergraduate studies, Suzanne decided to pursue her interest in metal work first through the Taos Institute of Art, and finally through the MFA program at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Suzanne's work flourished as her first year came to a close. With confidence and knowledge gained, Suzanne prepared for her second year which was the beginning of her body of work, the Thesis.

"Embracing the Celestial Body" is the beginning of a series of work that Suzanne started her second year at RIT. Though the work is new, the premise and foundation of the ideas and issues addressed have been a constant in Suzanne's adult life. Suzanne's work deals with the issues inherent in dealing with family, self and society. This body of work specifically deals with the effect Suzanne's sexuality has had on her relationship to those closest to her - her family. The thesis work is as much reflection as it is therapy. The process of creating this body of work has allowed Suzanne to deal with her struggle to define herself as a person, a daughter, sister, aunt and friend.

There are six pieces in this body of work supporting and expressing a variety of unresolved issues. The six pieces all have a common thread in that they all deal with feelings. The other similarity can be seen in the common use of materials -- steel,



copper, photographs, and bark. These materials were carefully chosen for their symbolic meaning. The actual physical construction of the work as well as the specific materials often served as metaphors or clues as well as visual references to parts of the body. This body of work creates unity not only in materials used but in form and process as well.

Suzanne's work is based on her experiences. She uses her past, her experience travelling and images from childhood in creating these pieces. A wide variety of vessels, containers, objects of torture as well as protective mechanisms have influenced the development of this body of work. These objects have ranged from African vessels to medieval torture devises. In this body of work, Suzanne has embraced the vessel form both for it's reference to the human body, as well as for it's uses - a place to hide, a weapon, a vehicle, a container, an object of torture, and finally a resting place.



---

Suzanne Tindall Grantham  
*Artist statement*

My work focuses on the capturing of an emotion or moment in a given space. This space, defined by a vessel form, serves as both catharsis and metaphor. I feel the vessel best suits my artistic purposes in that it captures, within a defined space, that which is real but intangible. These vessels document the conflicting emotions, as well as the love and awe I have felt during my journey toward defining myself.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my family for their support and love.

---

## INTRODUCTION

In the beginning, the world makes sense in terms of relationships. The relationship between self and other becomes the foundation for such concepts as: community, interaction, and family. It is this idea of 'community' that gives insight into the social role each living thing takes. These roles define an individual from their position on a team, to the place they sit at the family table. These definitions create boundaries which, when exceeded, command respect; when failed - disappointment. Inherent in 'belonging' to society is the fitting into the majority of these boundaries. When an individual does not fit all these definitions - especially if they fail to meet a basic moral requirement, 'acceptance' becomes a goal based on charades and misconceptions. The thesis "Embracing The Celestial Body" is a journey which explores the emotions, defenses and charades we all play in order to fit into our respective familial communities.

According to Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary, celestial is defined as: "1. Of or relating to the sky 2. Heavenly: Spiritual". This definition pays homage to the knowledge that the search for truth and acceptance is primarily a very personal, often spiritual journey. In order to embrace who we are - body and soul, we must accept ourselves for all that we are. Although this work addresses issues specific to Suzanne's frame of reference, above all, it is intended to acknowledge the underlying issues common to us all. "Embracing The Celestial Body" is a search for peace within oneself through which the attributes of strength and courage evolve into acceptance of ourselves.

## STATEMENT OF INTENT

This thesis "Embracing The Celestial Body" is a series of vessels intended to portray feelings and thoughts relating to the universal search for acceptance. These vessels attempt to capture and evoke feelings surrounding acceptance - in light of familial interaction, societal boundaries and social status. The intent here is to validate the emotions we all must confront in our search for who we want to be.

## THE WORK

There are six pieces in this body of work. The viewer will notice that all six are vessels of sorts - constructed from copper, steel and bark elements. Many have holes which house photographs or have mesh components enclosing objects within. Several pieces also have sharp objects on or around them. These structural elements provide visual 'clues' as to the message of each piece. Each piece is highly symbolic and purposefully cryptic. Below are outlined influences and references essential to understanding the message of each piece.

The shapes of the elements in this body of work come from a response to time spent in Africa. The conical shapes and round forms stem from interest in containers, pods, seeds, gourds, drums and vessels used by the Masi. These forms seemed appropriate in regard to the intended message. The Masi approach these natural vessels with an artistic respect for form as well as respect for the spiritual importance of what is contained inside. In examining the form, message and personal catharsis of this body of work, the vessel has become a metaphor for the human body. Using this metaphor has allowed this body of work to address not only the tangible surface of the vessel itself, but also that which is implied. The feelings, though untouchable, are just as real and important as the forms themselves and are an integral part of this thesis.

Copper is used because of its distinctive characteristics. The colors and malleability of this material result in the ability to form the skin-like material into ripples,

bumps and undulation. Process is important because the physical act of creation results in the cathartic illusion of actually fabricating skin, body parts, even emotions.

Steel is used for structural support because of its rigidity and strength. Steel also has an air of coldness which lends a feeling of distance. The structural qualities of steel are important, but the importance of color cannot be dismissed as attention to surface detail is a vital aspect of my work. The cold metal has strength not unrelated to the bars in a window keeping intruders out.

The bark is used as another metaphor for skin. It is the material used to emphasize sensitivity in contrast to the harshness of the metal. The bark is also a protective element, sealing the inside in. Understand that the bark is a protective skin, but unlike the metal it can be penetrated, scarred, violated.

Photographs are used to help the viewer associate a human being with the feelings elicited by the work. Often these photographs are seen through holes or mesh. This is intended to give the viewer a sense of being an outsider looking in. The copper and steel mesh used in some pieces gives a sense of being caged. Though the mesh protects what is inside (a photograph, or an object which is being nurtured), it also keeps out what is feared.

Several pieces have sharp objects on or around them. The conical shapes, sharp thorns and spikes are protective mechanisms symbolizing fear and/or the need for outer defense. These are defensive rather than offensive mechanisms intended to keep what is on the inside safe. These sharp objects are not meant to hurt anyone, unless intruded upon or provoked. They are part of the facade - tough and



mean on the outside, the inside is soft and vulnerable.

This work also draws from the torture/restraining devices of the Medieval and Gothic periods. The form and mechanics of shackles, cages and screws were used to intentionally evoke feelings of restraint and claustrophobia.

In conclusion, the creation of this body of work involved developing a series of visual references to feelings. In order to do this, it was necessary to develop a language that somehow paralleled the crazy charades we play in order to please our families and society. Developing this language required establishing a system of oblique information or clues that allow the viewer to associate and relate to these universal feelings. This language consisted of a pattern of materials, process and form.



Fig - 1: Container / Containment / Contained  
Copper, Steel, Photography 6'6" x 1'8" x 1'8" ..... 10



### Container/ Containment/ Contained

This piece deals with the 'hidden', the unknown. It also acknowledges the comfort and security of the way things are. Most importantly it reflects fear of the outside, and of letting those who judge in.

This is the first in the "Embracing The Celestial Body" series of work. This piece talks about feeling trapped in a body that has not dealt with it's own identity, about the suffocating weight caused by the caging of emotions. The act of removing one's self, and emotions from possible harm hints of an underlining fear.

The photographs in the piece are images of myself. The light in the piece allows the viewer to see the actual photograph, but also creates a feeling of warmth and security. The face of a shadowed woman reaches out, this image extends outward from its cramped quarters toward the world which is enticing but frightening.

The steel in this piece is structurally imperative. The copper acts as a sheath which encompasses the piece like skin trembling with uneasiness. This is my armor, my defense mechanism, my coffin. The photographs inform the viewer that there is a message hidden within. The precise and repetitive screws seem almost excessive but are necessary to hold the shape of the restraint - like a skin being tanned and cured. The openings are seen as breathing vents as well as orifices. These openings are lined with spikes which keep out as well as maintaining what is inside.



Fig - 2: **Muted**

Copper, Steel, Photograph, Birch bark 2'8" x 1' x 1' .....12

## Muted

"Muted" is the second piece in this series. This piece talks about the voice as a universal way of communication and expression. "Muted" has a double meaning. It implies that the voice has been taken away, and simultaneously the individual has become less vibrant. "Muted" specifically addresses feeling like one has no voice.

"Muted" hangs static on the wall. It is held up by a shackle with a hinged lock. The vessel represents the individual trapped and at the mercy of the viewer. An opening pierces the neck of the vessel like a tracheotomy. A solarized black & white self-portrait lies recessed within this 'throat'. This is an image of myself on the floor, my naked back surrounded by broken branches - my crumbling protection.

The missing voice box not only protects the audience from hearing 'immoral' thoughts, it also protects the individual from repercussions. This missing voice results in the feeling of being trapped, it also infers the swallowing of pride, and lying through omission.

At the bottom of this piece is a heart woven from the bark of a fallen yellow birch tree. Woven like a basket, this organ is rich with feelings and easily penetrated. The heart is connected to the voice. Conversely, the voice is connected to the heart, as the voice disappears and anger rises, it mutes the character inside along with it. The delicate heart bears the weight of this shackled vessel.

Once again steel is used as a structural element. The copper is heat treated, resulting in a red similar to blood. The spikes protruding from the throat act as a defense mechanism.





Fig - 3: Shield  
Copper, Bark, Steel 3'9" x 1' x 8" .....14

## Shield

"Shield" is the protective piece in the series. The work is meant to be placed passively on the floor. "Shield" deals with a self-protective nature, not an aggressive one. The context of the piece is non-threatening. It is intended, like an armored shell, to shield us from what may hurt. The shield rests on the side of the other pieces - ready to fend off insensitivity, to preserve privacy, to protect.

The shield is based on the shell of armadillos. These animals are quite distinctive in appearance but are considered unattractive animals. I often related to these animals growing up.

Steel is used once again as the structural element, and the copper as an impenetrable skin. In the center there is a large piece of deeply scarred bark. On either end there are large coldly glinting steel spikes.



Fig - 4: Crown of Thorns

Bark, Copper, Steel 2' x 7" x 4" .....16

## Crown of Thorns

This is the most overt piece in this body of work - symbolizing the pain and discomfort resulting from definitions which do not fit. "Crown of Thorns" symbolizes my femininity as well as my love for women. This piece rejects, embraces and protects what is sacred.

A vagina is not all that I am, but it is where I come from, something I possess and is part of a definition I do not fully embrace or understand. The womb is a starting place for life, it is beginning of the cycle which places me in the cosmos of things. It is also a cocoon - allowing for rebirth - a place to shed old skin and to reveal the new.

I use the bark here as a casing, a cocoon channeling and protecting the woman within. The copper itself is formed in the shape of a vagina. It represents society's definition of a woman. I use the steel spikes like crossed bars. These bars protect from intruders - keeping out and harming uncaring hands.



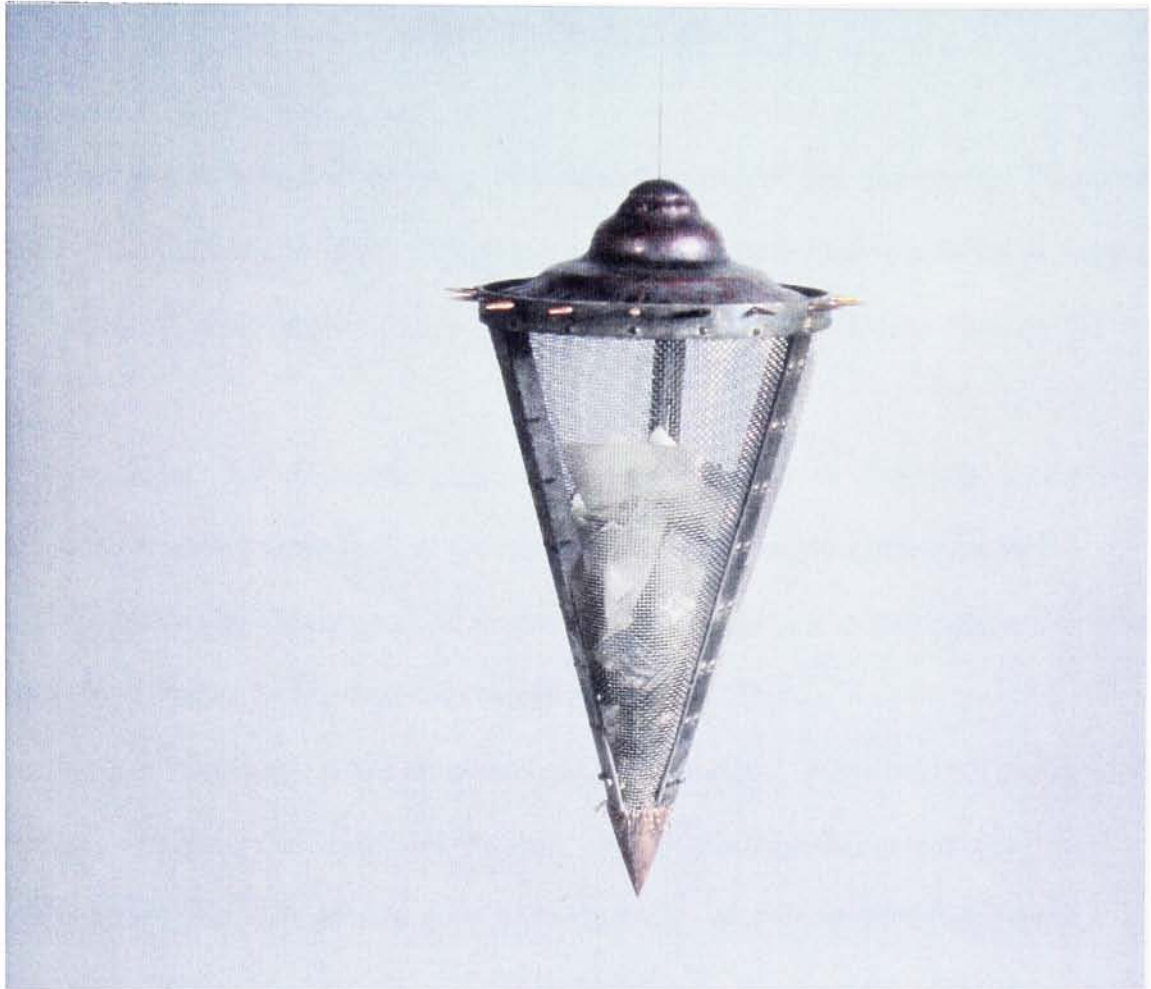


Fig - 5: **Passages: An Hourglass**  
Copper, Steel, Photographs, Sand 2' x 1'2" x 1'2" .....18

### **Passages: An Hourglass**

This piece is meant to be hung and placed so movement can occur. The steel structure and mesh are a cage. The top is spun copper pierced by a cable in order to hang. There are photographs in the cage referencing individuals held close to the heart.

"Passages" is a piece dedicated to the passage of time. This passage of time relates to memories and images of loved ones. Caged images place people in context concerning relationships and interaction. Here the pot is filled with old images - a reminder of how I have dealt with loved ones in my past.

This swinging cage is a pendulum and an hourglass. Here we record time and information sifting out the good and the bad. These photographs are caged, then funneled, coming up with what is pure and important. Some are burnt signifying things that I wish to put behind me. Other photographs are pictures of family, friends, companions, and loved ones.

The hourglass becomes a tale, a tool to keep track of time and an instrument to let you know time is running out. In this piece others are trapped within, while I remain outside, sifting through, reflecting on what is important. I place images in this cage in order to sift as well as a reminder to myself and others that we are locked into the events in our past.



Fig - 6: Growth  
Bronze, Steel, Grass 1'4" x 4" x 2" .....20



## Growth

"Growth" is the last piece in the series and one I feel very attached to. This piece concerns and deals with continuation. It talks about survival and existence.

This piece became my 'Chia pet', through it I learned something very valid about the importance of interaction. The watering of the piece everyday, as I watched it grow, made me realize that without interaction there would be no growth. I realized that hiding from interaction kept me safe for a while, but at some point I would have to come out in order to grow.

I can only imagine actually being able to share and interact with others who do the same. To me, the real accomplishment here is allowing yourself the room to acknowledge and honor everything that is you. The only way to be whole, it seems, is to maintain honesty and truth, even when it hurts.

I sand casted bronze for the form and used a steel screen to close the opening. I placed soil and planted grass in the center and with a little love and care, I was able to watch it grow.

## CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, "Embracing The Celestial Body" examines self-definition in light of our relationships. It also looks at acceptance from several points of view: acceptance of self, from others and finally in light of how we are viewed by society. By using materials referencing skin, strength, perseverance and insight, "Embracing The Celestial Body" metaphorically relives the issues examined here.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amin, Mohamed and Eames, John. The Last of the Masi. London: Modley Head Ltd., 1987.

Berkley Books, Webster's II, New Riverside Dictionary. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984.

Goldsworthy, Andy, Andy Goldsworthy: A Collaboration with Nature. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990.

Harris, Michael. "Resonance, Transformation, And Rhyme, The art of Renee Stout." Astonishment And Power. Washington: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

Macgaffey, Wyatt. "The Eyes Of Understanding, Kongo Minkisi." Astonishment And Power. Washington: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

Mendieta, Ana. Ana Mendieta: A Book of Works. Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1993.

Mendieta, Ana. Ana Mendieta, A Retrospective. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987.